

East European Jews in the German-Jewish Imagination From the Ludwig Rosenberger Library of Judaica

The symbol of East European Jewry was an important tool of German-Jewish self-definition. Were these so-called *Ostjuden* foreign or family? Did they represent a tradition from which German Jews would have to dissociate in order to secure their civic equality as Germans, or were they fellow members of a single Jewish nation? The stereotypes that German Jews attached to East European Jews reflect their own evolving self-perception and conflicting national aspirations.

The long and difficult path toward emancipation during the nineteenth century led German Jews to reject traditional notions of Jewish nationhood and to refashion themselves as “German citizens of the Mosaic faith.” In their efforts to assimilate, they deliberately adopted German middle-class gentility, politeness, and aesthetic refinement, and contrasted these traits with a crude stereotype of East European Jewish life. They created a caricature of the ghetto, which signified not only a confined space but also a self-segregating worldview. German *Kultur* was viewed as the path out of the ghetto of traditional society into the modern nation-state.

Around the turn of the century, many German Jews shifted their focus from assimilation to self-determination, and from German fatherland to Jewish homeland. The image of the *Ostjuden* was likewise transformed. Distant strangers became long-lost brothers. Archaic tradition became a source of cultural authenticity. The nobility of life in the *shtetl* (Jewish town), the beauty of traditional religious observance and the perceived cohesion of Jewish national identity in the East were held up as ideals against the tendencies toward intermarriage, apostasy and even self-hatred associated with post-assimilation German-Jewish life. What had been disparaged became a source of romantic fascination and pride.

Throughout this period, imagination had to be reconciled with reality. The stereotypes that German Jews attached to the *Ostjuden* were conditioned by actual historical encounters between the two groups. With the westward migration of Jewish refugees in the wake of the Russian pogroms the *Ostjuden* became a visible presence in Germany. As German-Jewish soldiers made the opposite journey toward the eastern front during World War I, the physical reality of the ghetto either intensified or overturned preconceived images of the *Ostjuden*. Whether the ghetto came to Germany or Germany went to the ghetto, physical contact between German and East European Jews played a powerful role in shaping perceptions of self and other.

Equally significant in the revision of German-Jewish identity were encounters between Jews and non-Jews. Whether rich or poor, assimilated or traditional, western or eastern in appearance and custom, all Jewish stereotypes fed the anti-Semitic imagination, and all Jews came to be seen as an alien presence on German soil. The enduring question of Jewish nationhood was therefore supplanted by a racial identity defined and imposed by others. Indeed, the efforts of German Jews to distinguish themselves from the *Ostjuden* were overshadowed by the efforts of Germans to distinguish themselves from the Jews.

Stereotypes often play a central role in the formation of collective identities. The items on view represent the changing symbol of the *Ostjuden* in the German-Jewish imagination and experience; as such, they reflect the complex face of German Jewry itself.

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Case 1

“New Jews” vs. “Old Jews”: Emancipation, Assimilation, and the *Ostjuden* as Other

Jewish emancipation was a slow and uncertain process in Germany, dragging on from the Prussian Edict of Toleration of 1812 until the consolidation of the German Republic in 1871. Even the most “enlightened” supporters of the cause assumed that the Jews could attain full civil rights only after having achieved intellectual and moral improvement. German Jews, seeking to prove their commitment to the fatherland, dissolved traditional notions of Jewish nationhood and worked to acculturate into the educated middle class, or *Bildungsbürgertum*.

Assimilation produced a distinction between the “new” assimilated German Jew and the “old” Jew of Eastern Europe. The ghetto Jew stood for the characteristics of Jewish culture to be supplanted by German *Sittlichkeit* (morality and refinement). Thus, the caftan was discarded in favor of the cravat, and Yiddish was derided as a vulgar German dialect. Moses Mendelssohn, the chief spokesman of the Jewish Enlightenment, described this so-called “jargon” as “a language of stammers, corrupt and deformed, repulsive to those who are able to speak in a correct and elegant manner.” Proponents of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (The Science of Judaism) who sought to reform Jewish education and worship replaced the tradition of *talmud torah* (religious study) with the German ideal of *Bildung* (secular education and self-cultivation).

In popular literature, so-called “ghetto stories” offered a romantic yet patronizing view of East European Jewish life. Their authors were liberal enlighteners whose sympathy for East European Jews was mixed with criticism of their religious obscurantism. Many of these stories portray East European Jews who strive to achieve intellectual and cultural sophistication through German *Bildung*.

Item 1. David Friedländer, *Über die Verbesserung der Israeliten im Königreich Pohlen* (1816), Rosenberger 216B-10A.

David Friedländer associated Poland with Hasidism, mysticism and the irrational, which he believed violated the “religion of reason” emerging from the German Enlightenment. In this work, he describes Polish Jews as “the most cloddish and unrefined class of human beings. In terms of culture and morality they stand on the lowest level next to wild animals.”

Item 2. Heinrich Grätz, *Geschichte der Juden* (1888-1900), Rosenberger 65A-2.

Grätz’s *History of the Jews* exemplifies the scholarly focus of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, which contrasted German *Bildung* with the “irrational” Hasidism of Poland and the “superrational” Talmudic discourse of the Lithuania. Grätz refused to allow his book to be translated into Yiddish, which he called a “half-bestial language.”

Item 3. Karl Emil Franzos, *The Jews of Barnow* (1883), Rosenberger 40-14.

Franzos referred to Eastern Europe as *Halb-Asien* (Half Asia), a world of squalor and superstition. His satirical depiction of fictional Barnow, based on his own Galician hometown, blames the indigence of Polish Jewry on the callousness of the Polish authorities. Franzos viewed German *Kultur* as the solution to the economic and social problems of Polish Jewry.

Case 2

The Ghetto Comes to Germany: *Ostjuden* as Welfare Cause

From the Russian pogroms of 1881 until the outbreak of World War I in 1914, over two and a half million Jews migrated westward from Eastern Europe. Although America was the intended destination of the vast majority, Germany was the main gateway to the West, and the passage of refugees through German borders provoked fear of mass immigration. Despite their relatively minor presence within Germany, the concentration of *Ostjuden* in urban centers such as Berlin's *Scheunenviertel* created the appearance of a strong presence. Anti-Semitic discourse amplified this perception. The historian Heinrich von Treitschke denounced the impoverished *Ostjuden* who, according to him, leeches off of the German economy and then climbed their way into wealth and power. Ostensibly a response to the influx of East European Jewish beggars and peddlers, Treitschke's critique actually obscured the difference between the immigrant *Ostjuden* and native German Jews.

The response of German Jews to the immigrant question—or *Ostjudenfrage*—was mixed. At the organizational level, German Jews acted charitably toward the refugees, establishing aid agencies to fight for their basic rights and economic improvement. But most regarded the *Ostjuden* as a hindrance to German-Jewish integration, and many aid organizations therefore encouraged their settlement abroad. Theodor Herzl defined political Zionism along these lines as “a kind of new Jewish care for the sick.” According to Herzl, the goal of political Zionism was to eradicate the poverty-stricken ghetto by facilitating migration to Palestine. Whether contemptuous or compassionate, responses to the plight of East European Jewry demonstrate the extent to which German Jews had dissolved Jewish national moorings.

Item 1. Heinrich von Treitschke, *Ein Wort über unser Judenthum* (1880), Rosenberger 247-588.

Treitschke refers to the Jewish “pants-sellers,” conflating the two anti-Jewish stereotypes of the penniless *Schnorrer* (beggar) newly arrived from the East and the opportunistic parvenu who was already established economically in Germany's expanding cities. According to Treitschke's analysis, all Jews were unwelcome strangers and parasites on German soil.

Item 2. Walter Rathenau, *Höre Israel* (1897), *Die Zukunft*, vol. 18 (1897). Regenstein Stacks AP30.Z9.

Prominent statesman and industrialist Walter Rathenau urged German Jews to cast off their “tribal attributes” and become “Jews of German character and education.” In this severe critique of his fellow Jews, he evokes physical and racial stereotypes typically associated with the *Ostjuden*.

Item 3. Theodor Herzl, *Altneuland* (1919?), Rosenberger 334A-3.

The protagonist of Herzl's utopian Zionist novel is an assimilated Viennese Jew whose Zionist loyalty emerges from his charitable relationship with a family of poor East European Jewish peddlers trying to make their way to Palestine. Until the 1930s, most German Zionists supported the movement through charity, rather than immigrating themselves, and thus were able to reconcile their Zionist affiliation with abiding commitments to Germany.

Item 4. Max Nordau, 5. *Zionistencongress Basel, Generalreferat: Fragen der körperlichen, geistigen und wirtschaftlichen Hebung des Judentums* (1901), Rosenberger 336-18.

Nordau called for a “Judaism of Muscles” (*Muskeljudentum*) to transform the “nation of beggars and intellectuals” into an economically self-sufficient people. He identified the practices of early marriage, premature school enrollment, and long hours of academic instruction in “filthy”

cheders (Jewish primary schools) as causes for the physical and emotional “degeneration” of East European Jews.

Case 3

“Old Jew” Turned “New Jew”: Jewish Renaissance and the Romanticized *Ostjuden*

Cultural Zionists promoted national unity rooted in a shared Jewish culture. Martin Buber’s call for a “Jewish Renaissance” was a reaction to both the deleterious effects of assimilation and the rise of German anti-Semitism, which was now being expressed in ethnic terms. Just as German conservatives cultivated myth, mysticism, and folklore as part of their “Volkish” ideology, Buber located the primordial essence of Jewish culture in Hasidic folklore. Through his Hasidic tales, he encouraged German Jews to recognize their East European brothers as the torchbearers of a shared myth of origins.

Art and literature were central to the Jewish renaissance. The *Jüdischer Almanach* (1902), which inaugurated Buber’s *Jüdischer Verlag* (Jewish Publishing House), contained art, poems and prose by both eastern and western contributors. Buber’s co-editor, Berthold Feiwel, wrote that the aim of the book was to “emphasize the unity of creativity within a living Judaism” by combining “the rootedness in folklore and tradition of the *Ostjuden* with the commitment to European culture of West European Zionism.” Buber and Feiwel, along with the art editor E.M. Lilien, were founding members of the Democratic Faction, the first self-proclaimed party within the Zionist movement, which emphasized the positive relationship between national and cultural aspirations. Several artists included in the book, such as Hermann Struck, Max Liebermann, Lesser Ury and Lilien himself, were featured in the Jewish art exhibition at the Fifth Zionist Congress (1901).

Buber and his cohort were less concerned with the actual plight of East European Jews than with the spiritual crisis facing assimilated German Jewry. Real encounters during and after World War I would challenge their Romantic images of the *Ostjuden*.

Item 1. Martin Buber, *Mein Weg zum Chasidismus* (1918), Rosenberger 234A-23.

Buber was born in Vienna but spent much of his childhood in Sadagora, Galicia, in the home of his grandfather, the acclaimed Talmud scholar Solomon Buber. It was here that he first encountered the “thriving religiosity” of Hasidism. In this personal memoir, Buber recounts his discovery of “Jewish unity” and “Jewish leadership” in the synagogues and study houses of Sadagora.

Item 2. *Jüdischer Almanach* (1904), Rosenberger 25-1.

The *Jüdischer Almanach* includes translations of Hebrew and Yiddish literature by writers such as Morris Rosenfeld, H.N. Bialik, Sholem Aleichem, and Scholem Asch. Most of the illustrations have East European themes. Though the primary objective of the book was to promote Jewish unity across geographical boundaries, it was geared first and foremost to a middle-class German-Jewish audience.

Item 3. E.M. Lilien, *Lieder des Ghetto* (n.d.), Rosenberger 27-83.

Lilien’s illustrations for the German translation of *Poems of the Ghetto* (1903), by the Yiddish-American poet Morris Rosenfeld were used in Zionist promotions. The blend of Yiddish poems and *Jugendstil* images exemplifies the efforts of cultural Zionists to synthesize the best of eastern

and western Jewish culture. In this image, the idealized *Ostjude* is shackled to the Diaspora while looking longingly toward Zion.

Item 4. S.J. Agnon, “Aufstieg und Abstieg,” in *Der Jude* (1924), No. 1: 38 [Online: <http://www.compactmemory.de/>].

Buber published many German translations of literature by East European Jews in his journal *Der Jude* (“The Jew”), including the pseudo-midrashic tales of S.Y. Agnon, the Galician-born Hebrew writer. Buber saw Agnon as the quintessential “New Jew”: “Galician and Palestinian, Hasid and pioneer – in his true heart he carries the essence of both worlds in the equilibrium of consecration.” The story *Aufstieg und Abstieg* (“Ascent and Descent”) was translated into German by the philosopher and historian Gershom (Gerhard) Scholem.

Case 4:

Germany Goes to the Ghetto: German-Jewish Soldiers on the Eastern Front

The plight of East European Jewry acquired greater political urgency during World War I as German-Jewish soldiers on the eastern front discovered the immense suffering and squalor in the ghettos. Though most German Jews supported the fatherland in the war, physical contact with the *Ostjuden* challenged established national loyalties and personalized what for many had been an abstract matter. The inaugural issue of Buber’s journal *Der Jude* contained numerous expressions of concern for the *Ostjudenfrage*. Jewish journalists and writers stationed in the East described the devastating effects of the war on East European Jewish life while those in Germany wrote about the grim situation on the home front. Though German Jews had long opposed mass settlement of *Ostjuden* in Germany, many were outraged by the anti-Semitic rhetoric that accompanied the new policy of *Grenzschluss* (border closing), which curtailed the entry of Jewish refugees.

Solidarity with the *Ostjuden* often betrayed antipathy toward the bourgeois values of liberal German society. Whereas the previous generation of German Jews expressed shame over their eastern counterparts, their own children were embarrassed by the materialism of their parents and looked eastward for a source of renewed pride. This “cult of the *Ostjuden*” criticized both assimilated Jews and Western Zionists who flirted with East European Jewish culture as an abstraction but remained estranged from the reality of their own people.

Item 1. Hermann Struck, *Skizzen aus Litauen, Weissrussland und Kurland* (1916), Rosenberger 27-150

While stationed on the eastern front, Struck and Eulenberg composed these sketches and accompanying text to expose a German audience to Jewish life in the easternmost region of the Russian Empire. The image of the honest Jewish porter is intended to dispel stereotypes of the wealthy Jewish moneylender and capitalist parvenu. In the preface, the authors proclaim their allegiance to Germany.

Item 2. Arnold Zweig and Hermann Struck. *Das ostjüdische Antlitz* (1920), Rosenberger 25-157.

Zweig portrayed East European Jewry in mythic terms as the living embodiment of an authentic Jewishness upon which Zionist renewal was to be built. Addressing the contentious issue of

Jewish prostitution, he hoped to salvage the respectability of the archetypal East European Jewish girl by presenting her as “the victim and symbol of our European situation.”

Item 3. “Die Ostjudenfrage,” in *Ost und West* (1916), No. 2 (February 1916): 73 [Online: <http://www.compactmemory.de/>]

The journal *Ost und West* (“East and West”) promoted a Jewish ethnic identity by transferring the negative stereotype of the Jewish parvenu long associated with East European Jews to assimilated German Jews who had forsaken their Jewish identity.

Item 4. Nathan Birnbaum, “Den Ostjuden ihr Recht!” (1915) Rosenberger 247-63.

Birnbaum criticized cultural Zionists for offering a romanticized vision of the *Ostjuden* that overlooked their present reality. Though he coined the term “Zionism,” Birnbaum broke with the movement and turned instead to Yiddishism and Diaspora Nationalism, making the retention of East European Jewish culture his central aim. He served as an organizer of the 1908 Czernowitz Conference, which promoted Yiddish as a national Jewish language.

Case 5:

The End of German-Jewish Life: *Ostjuden* as a Metaphor for All Jews

Anti-Semitism escalated in the post-war climate of inflation and unemployment. Fears of invasion by East European Jews resurfaced in the Weimar Republic, and the *Ostjudenfrage* came to symbolize the wider “Jewish question.” Liberal German-Jewish intellectuals who remained committed to the fatherland were generally unable to acknowledge East European Jews as members of a shared nation.

Other German Jews grew more accepting of their eastern counterparts as they were confronted with the reality of German-Jewish incompatibility. The title of Joseph Roth’s *The Wandering Jews*, which portrayed the plight of East European Jewish refugees in the wake of World War I, took on a new meaning following Hitler’s Nuremberg Laws of 1935. In his preface to the second edition, Roth explained that the title no longer referred exclusively to the East European refugee but also to the German Jew, who was “more exposed and more homeless even than his cousin in Lodz.” Having lost their civil rights, German Jews were either forced into exile or left homeless in their own land.

As the German public grew more unified in their hostility toward the Jews, few anti-Semites cared to distinguish between eastern and western Jews. The old image of the “alien” *Ostjude* became an all-encompassing metaphor that paved the way for the indiscriminate devastation of Jewish life throughout Europe.

Item 1. Theodor Lessing, *Deutschland und seine Juden* (1933), Rosenberger 242A-3.

Lessing compared the prospect of relinquishing one aspect of German-Jewish identity for the other to making an impossible choice between one’s father and mother. His murder at the hand of the Nazis in 1933 renders his commitment to German culture all the more tragic.

Item 2. Jakob Wasserman, *Mein Weg als Deutscher und Jude* (1922) 183-384.

An assimilated German Jew, Wasserman felt neither a religious nor a national connection to Judaism, and viewed the *Ostjuden* as foreign. “If I spoke with a Polish or Galician Jew and tried to understand his way of life and thinking, I could stir myself to feel compassion or sadness, but

never a sense of brotherhood. He was entirely strange and, when individual human sympathy was lacking, even repulsive.”

Item 3. *Der Giftpilz*, Verlag der Stürmer (1938), Rosenberger 468C-104 [Story: “So kamen die Juden zu uns,” (How the Jews Got Here)]

This Nazi propaganda textbook cautions children against Jews. In this story, young Fritz learns about the “Jewish Swindle” from his father: all German Jews are former *Ostjuden* who stole German money to become rich and then shed their “filthy clothing, lice-ridden beards, and vulgar language” in order to resemble Germans. However, Fritz learns, they can never shed their “Jewish noses, ears, and crooked legs.”

Item 4. Joseph Roth, *Juden auf Wanderschaft* (1927), Rosenberger 434-385.

Roth’s depiction of the decline of East European Jewish life after World War I weaves together his sympathy for the “simple people” of the ghetto and his antipathy to an increasingly homogeneous bourgeoisie. In his somber preface to the 1937 edition, Roth lamented the shared fate of all “wandering Jews,” both western and eastern in origin.

Item 5.

Reproduction from preface of

Joseph Roth (1894-1939). *The Wandering Jews translated by Michael Hofmann*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001.

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